Working Conditions

What were the working conditions like during the Industrial Revolution? Well, for starters, the working class—who made up 80% of society—had little or no bargaining power with their new employers. Since population was increasing in Great Britain at the same time that landowners were enclosing common village lands, people from the countryside flocked to the towns and the new factories to get work. This resulted in a very high unemployment rate for workers in the first phases of the Industrial Revolution. Henry Mayhew, studied the London poor in 1823, and he observed that “there is barely sufficient work for the regular employment of half of our laborers, so that only 1,500,000 are fully and constantly employed, while 1,500,000 more are employed only half their time, and the remaining 1,500,000 wholly unemployed”. As a result, the new factory owners could set the terms of work because there were far more unskilled laborers, who had few skills and would take any job, than there were jobs for them. And since the textile industries were so new at the end of the 18th century, there were initially no laws to regulate them. Desperate for work, the migrants to the new industrial towns had no bargaining power to demand higher wages, fairer work hours, or better working conditions. Worse still, since only wealthy people in Great Britain were eligible to vote, workers could not use the democratic political system to fight for rights and reforms. In 1799 and 1800, the British Parliament passed the **Combination Acts,** which made it illegal for workers to unionize, or combine, as a group to ask for better working conditions.

Many of the unemployed or underemployed were skilled workers, such as hand weavers, whose talents and experience became useless because they could not compete with the efficiency of the new textile machines. In 1832, one observer saw how the skilled hand weavers had lost their way and were reduced to starvation. “It is truly lamentable to behold so many thousands of men who formerly earned 20 to 30 shillings per week, now compelled to live on 5, 4, or even less.”

For the first generation of workers—from the 1790s to the 1840s—working conditions were very tough, and sometimes tragic. Most laborers worked 10 to 14 hours a day, six days a week, with no paid vacation or holidays. Each industry had safety hazards too; the process of purifying iron, for example, demanded that workers toiled amidst temperatures as high as 130 degrees in the coolest part of the ironworks. Under such dangerous conditions, accidents on the job occurred regularly. A report commissioned by the British House of Commons in 1832 commented that "there are factories, no means few in number, nor confined to the smaller mills, in which serious accidents are continually occurring, and in which, notwithstanding, dangerous parts of the machinery are allowed to remain unfence.” The report added that workers were often "abandoned from the moment that an accident occurs; their wages are stopped, no medical attendance is provided, and whatever the extent of the injury, no compensation is afforded.” As the Sadler report shows, injured workers would typically lose their jobs and also receive no financial compensation for their injury to pay for much needed health care.

Life in the factory was most challenging for the first generation of industrial workers who still remembered the slower and more flexible pace of country life. Factory employers demanded a complete change of pace and discipline from the village life. Workers could not wander over to chat with their neighbors or family as they would have done while working in the country. They could not return to the village during harvest time to help their families, unless they wanted to lose their jobs. Instead, they were no longer their own bosses; foremen and overseers supervised a new working culture to insure that workers’ actions were focused and efficient. A few workers were able to improve their lot by going into business for themselves or winning a job as a supervisor, But the majority saw very little social mobility.

**Child Labor**

Child labor was, unfortunately, integral to the first factories, mines, and mills in England. In textile mills, as new power looms and spinning mules took the place of skilled workers, factory owners used cheap, unskilled labor to decrease the cost of production. And, child labor was the cheapest labor of all. Some of these machines were so easy to operate that a small child could perform the simple, repetitive tasks. Some maintenance tasks, such as squeezing into tight spaces, could be performed more easily by children than adults. And, children did not try to join workers unions or go on strike. Best of all, they were paid 1/10 of what men were paid. It’s not surprising, then, that children were heavily employed in the first factories in history. In 1789, in Richard Arkwright’s new spinning factory, two-thirds of 1,150 factory workers were children. (Ashton 93)

The tedious and dangerous factory work had negative effects on the health of children. Doctor Turner Thackrah described the children leaving the Manchester cotton mills as “almost universally ill-looking, small, sickly, barefoot and ill-clad. Many appeared to be no older than seven. The men, generally from sixteen to twenty-four, and none aged, were almost as pallid and thin as the children” (Thompson 329) Observations such as these slowly made their way to the British government.

In the 1830s, the British Parliament began investigating the conditions in factories for children. One Member of Parliament, Michael Sadler, started a committee, in 1832, to send investigators out to factories to interview children and gather evidence about their working conditions. Sadler sought to pass a bill through Parliament to decrease child labor and regulate all factories to have a 10-hour work day. The transcripts from these investigations survive today as some of the best primary source evidence of child labor. Read the following accounts.

# Primary Source: Elizabeth Bentley (1832)

Question: What were your hours of labour?
Answer: As a child I worked from five in the morning till nine at night.
Question: What time was allowed for meals?
Answer: We were allowed forty minutes at noon.
Question: Had you any time to get breakfast, or drinking?
Answer: No, we got it as we could.
Question: Did you have time to eat it?
Answer: No; we were obliged to leave it or to take it home, and when we did not take it, the overlooker took it, and gave it to the pigs.
Question: Suppose you flagged a little, or were late, what would they do?
Answer: Strap us [whip with a strap or belt].
Question: What work did you do?
Answer: A weigher in the card-room.
Question: How long did you work there?
Answer: From half-past five [in the morning], till eight at night.
Question: What is the carding-room like?
Answer: Dusty. You cannot see each other for dust.
Question: Did working in the card-room affect your health?
Answer: Yes; it was so dusty, the dust got up my lungs, and the work was so hard. I got so bad in health, that when I pulled the baskets down, I pulled my bones out of their places.
Question: You are considerably deformed in your person in consequence of this labour?
Answer: Yes, I am.
Question: At what time did it come on?
Answer: I was about thirteen years old when it began coming, and it has got worse since. When my mother died I had to look after myself.
Question: Where are you now?
Answer: In the poor house.
Question: You are utterly incapable of working in the factories?
Answer: Yes
Question: You were willing to have worked as long as you were able, from your earliest age?
Answer: Yes.
Question: And you supported your widowed mother as long as you could?
Answer: Yes.

# Primary Source: Michael Crabtree (1832)

Question: What age are you?
Answer: Twenty-two.
Question: What is your occupation?
Answer: A blanket manufacturer.
Question: Have you ever been employed in a factory?
Answer: Yes.
Question: At what age did you first go to work in one?
Answer: Eight.
Question: How long did you continue in that occupation?
Answer: Four years.
Question: Will you state the hours of labour at the period when you first went to the factory, in ordinary times?
Answer: From 6 in the morning to 8 at night.
Question: Fourteen hours?
Answer: Yes.
Question: With what intervals for refreshment and rest?
Answer: An hour at noon.
Question: When trade was brisk what were your hours?
Answer: From 5 in the morning to 9 in the evening.
Question: Sixteen hours?
Answer: Yes.
Question: With what intervals at dinner?
Answer: An hour.
Question: How far did you live from the mill?
Answer: About two miles.
Question: Was there any time allowed for you to get your breakfast in the mill?
Answer: No.
Question: Did you take it before you left your home?
Answer: Generally.
Question: During those long hours of labour could you be punctual; how did you awake?
Answer: I seldom did awake spontaneously; I was most generally awoke or lifted out of bed, sometimes asleep, by my parents.
Question: Were you always in time?
Answer: No.
Question: What was the consequence if you had been too late?
Answer: I was most commonly beaten.
Question: Severely?
Answer: Very severely, I thought.
Question: In those mills is chastisement towards the latter part of the day going on perpetually?
Answer: Perpetually.
Question: So that you can hardly be in a mill without hearing constant crying?
Answer: Never an hour, I believe.
Question: Do you think that if the overlooker were naturally a humane person it would still be found necessary for him to beat the children, in order to keep up their attention and vigilance at the termination of those extraordinary days of labour?
Answer: Yes; the machine turns off a regular quantity of cardings, and of course, they must keep as regularly to their work the whole of the day; they must keep with the machine, and therefore however humane the slubber may be, as he must keep up with the machine or be found fault with, he spurs the children to keep up also by various means but that which he commonly resorts to is to strap them when they become drowsy.
Question: At the time when you were beaten for not keeping up with your work, were you anxious to have done it if you possibly could?
Answer: Yes; the dread of being beaten if we could not keep up with our work was a sufficient impulse to keep us to it if we could.
Question: When you got home at night after this labour, did you feel much fatigued?
Answer: Very much so.
Question: Had you any time to be with your parents, and to receive instruction from them?
Answer: No.
Question: What did you do?
Answer: All that we did when we got home was to get the little bit of supper that was provided for us and go to bed immediately. If the supper had not been ready directly, we should have gone to sleep while it was preparing.
Question: Did you not, as a child, feel it a very grievous hardship to be roused so soon in the morning?
Answer: I did.
Question: Were the rest of the children similarly circumstanced?
Answer: Yes, all of them; but they were not all of them so far from their work as I was.
Question: And if you had been too late you were under the apprehension of being cruelly beaten?
Answer: I generally was beaten when I happened to be too late; and when I got up in the morning the apprehension of that was so great, that I used to run, and cry all the way as I went to the mill.